

# MOVING GOODS AND PEOPLE

*Busy rail line becomes a trail*

## WISCONSIN DNR CONVERTS RAIL TO TRAIL

In 1997 the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources began exploring the possibility of converting the rail line to a trail under the federal Rails to Trail Act. The State of Wisconsin acquired the corridor in 2000 and the Badger State Trail was opened to the public in July 2007.

## TRAIL CONNECTIONS, FITCHBURG AND BEYOND

The Badger State Trail is 40 miles long, running from Madison to the Wisconsin-Illinois state line. The trail passes through Fitchburg, Belleville, Monticello, and Monroe from north to south. At its northern terminus in Madison, the trail connects to the Capital City and Military Ridge State Trails and Madison's Southwest Path. At its southern terminus at the Illinois border, the trail connects to the Jane Addams Trail and continues on to Freeport, Illinois. Points of interest along the trail include the FAR, the Belleville railroad depot, the Stewart Tunnel south of Belleville, and the Woolen Mill in Monticello. The trail hosts over 150,000 users each year.



▲ Riders exit the Stewart Tunnel, located on the Badger State Trail between Belleville and Monticello. The 1,200-foot tunnel was built in 1887. [Robin Davies]



For further information on the FAR, call (608) 270-4258.

This project was developed by the City of Fitchburg Planning and Zoning Department and was partly funded by a Dane County PARC grant.

THE PAST IS PRESENT



Passengers board an Illinois Central train at the Fitchburg Depot around 1910. [Wisconsin Historical Society WHI-2275]

## THE RISE AND FALL OF RAIL

Illinois Central Railroad Company (and later Illinois Central Gulf) operated a rail line on this corridor, from Freeport, Illinois to Madison, for over one hundred years. The rail line was built in 1886, with passenger trains running until 1942 and freight trains running until 1996.

## BIRTH OF THE ILLINOIS CENTRAL

Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas, members of the United States House of Representatives and United States Senate respectively, were instrumental in establishment of Illinois Central rail lines. Both Lincoln and Douglas supported a bill granting federal land to the Illinois Central, signed into law in 1850.

FITCHBURG AGRICULTURE ROUTE

## THE FAR TELLS FITCHBURG'S STORY

The **City of Fitchburg Agriculture Route (FAR)** consists of a 4.5-mile segment of the Badger State Trail running through the City. The FAR is part of the City's larger 19-mile Heritage Circle Route, a conceptual recreational trail encircling Fitchburg.

**The FAR is integral to the story of Fitchburg's past and present, a story in which agriculture plays a prominent role.**

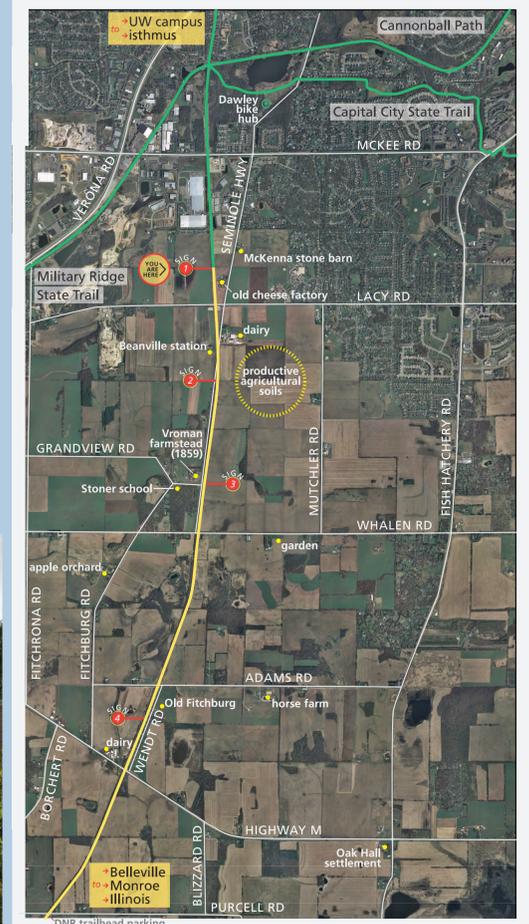
## FITCHBURG'S AGRICULTURAL "MAIN STREET"

Fitchburg is a unique city with approximately 11,000 acres of agricultural land within its borders. **This "country in the city" idea is displayed in land uses along the FAR**, which include areas and enterprises vital to Fitchburg's history, identity, and economy. FAR lands have many characteristics that make diverse agriculture enterprises viable, including proximity to major roads, the Badger State Trail, and urban markets, a strong agricultural heritage, and productive agricultural soils.

## THE FAR'S FUTURE

**The City is dedicated to working with**

**landowners and entrepreneurs** to encourage land uses along the FAR that promote, sustain, and enhance agriculture in the City, ensuring these lands continue to play a vital role in Fitchburg's future.



Gardens located along the FAR are important components of local food systems. [Emma Cassidy]



# FARMING PIONEERS

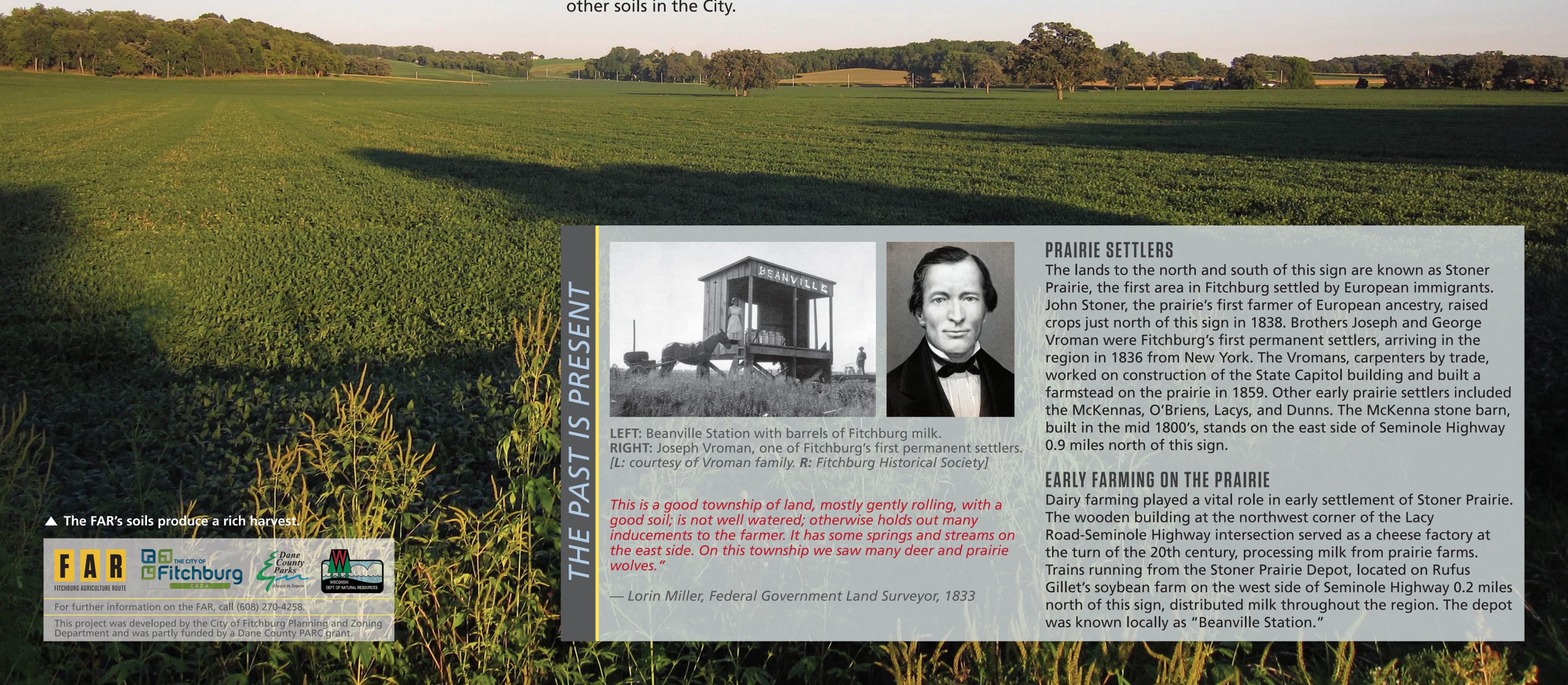
*Early settlers and soils lay groundwork for modern, large-scale agriculture*

## GENTENNIAL DAIRY

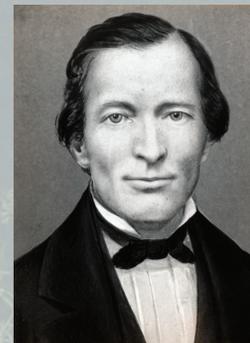
The O'Brien family dairy has been a part of Stoner Prairie since the early 1900's. In its early days the dairy housed an innovative milking parlor that became a dairy tour showcase and also served as a teaching center for the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Agriculture. A major dairy renovation took place in 2001, including installation of a modern milking parlor and a free stall barn to house cattle. The dairy lies just to the north of this sign, straddling both sides of Seminole Highway.

## BLACK GOLD

Viable agriculture begins with productive soil. Stoner Prairie, and the lands to the east of this sign, have some of the most productive soils in the United States. Soil productivity is measured by the crop volume that can be produced from an acre of soil given normal weather conditions. The soils to the east of this sign have a soil productivity score of 98 out of 100. Crops grown in these soils in recent years include corn and soybeans. These soils produce approximately 1½ times the number of bushels of corn and soybeans, per acre on average, compared to other soils in the City.



THE PAST IS PRESENT



LEFT: Beanville Station with barrels of Fitchburg milk.  
RIGHT: Joseph Vroman, one of Fitchburg's first permanent settlers.  
[L: courtesy of Vroman family. R: Fitchburg Historical Society]

*This is a good township of land, mostly gently rolling, with a good soil; is not well watered; otherwise holds out many inducements to the farmer. It has some springs and streams on the east side. On this township we saw many deer and prairie wolves."*

— Lorin Miller, Federal Government Land Surveyor, 1833

## PRAIRIE SETTLERS

The lands to the north and south of this sign are known as Stoner Prairie, the first area in Fitchburg settled by European immigrants. John Stoner, the prairie's first farmer of European ancestry, raised crops just north of this sign in 1838. Brothers Joseph and George Vroman were Fitchburg's first permanent settlers, arriving in the region in 1836 from New York. The Vromans, carpenters by trade, worked on construction of the State Capitol building and built a farmstead on the prairie in 1859. Other early prairie settlers included the McKennas, O'Briens, Lacys, and Dunns. The McKenna stone barn, built in the mid 1800's, stands on the east side of Seminole Highway 0.9 miles north of this sign.

## EARLY FARMING ON THE PRAIRIE

Dairy farming played a vital role in early settlement of Stoner Prairie. The wooden building at the northwest corner of the Lacy Road-Seminole Highway intersection served as a cheese factory at the turn of the 20th century, processing milk from prairie farms. Trains running from the Stoner Prairie Depot, located on Rufus Gillet's soybean farm on the west side of Seminole Highway 0.2 miles north of this sign, distributed milk throughout the region. The depot was known locally as "Beanville Station."

▲ The FAR's soils produce a rich harvest.



For further information on the FAR, call (608) 270-4258.

This project was developed by the City of Fitchburg Planning and Zoning Department and was partly funded by a Dane County PARC grant.

# RURAL SCHOOLS TO LOCAL FOODS

*Education of farm children to development of a local food system*

Gardens produce local food and foster a sense of community. [Emma Cassidy]

## THE FARM TO FORK RELATIONSHIP

A local food system distributes and consumes agricultural commodities in close proximity to where they are produced. These systems have various benefits including reduced transportation costs and carbon footprint, support of local farmers and economies, and educating consumers on where their food comes from, known as the “farm to fork” relationship. Additionally, many

agricultural activities that comprise local food systems use organic practices, eliminating pesticides and chemicals that may be detrimental to ecosystem health.

Various components of local food systems are located in close proximity to the FAR. These include a commercial apple orchard and a private garden managed by a non-profit organization that donates its produce to local food pantries.



THE PAST IS PRESENT



Stoner School students in 1957. [courtesy of Vroman family]

*“I’d like to pay tribute to the good work that those old one room schools did. Teachers were rather young girls themselves, they didn’t have college degrees. Yet their teaching made us skillful readers within two or three years. We got our fundamentals pretty well in that simple situation.”*

— William Dunn, University history professor and Fitchburg rural school student, 1923–1931

## STONER SCHOOL DAYS

Stoner School, located on the south side of Vroman Road 0.2 miles west of this sign, served to educate children living in rural areas of Fitchburg until 1967. The school was built in 1850 (a new building replaced it in 1927) and held grades 1 to 8. Students were assigned various tasks to ensure the school day ran smoothly, including cleaning toilets, fetching water, and even teaching.

*“The teacher was not the only educator. Sometimes the 7th and 8th graders were given the responsibility of instructing the primary grades while the teacher instructed intermediate grades.”*

— Catherine O’Brien Schneider, Stoner School student, 1955–1963

## RURAL SCHOOLS CLOSE

An act of the 1959 Wisconsin State Legislature required all lands in the state be part of a high school district by 1965, leading to the closure of many rural schools. The last class of students came through Stoner School’s doors in 1967, with rural Fitchburg children sent to schools in Madison, Oregon, and Verona thereafter.



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# RAIL SETTLEMENT RETAINS RURAL ROOTS

*A bustling village gives way to horse farm pastures*

## FITCHBURG'S "BLUEGRASS" REGION

As settlement shifted again in the mid-20th century, from Old Fitchburg to the area just south of U.S. highways 12 and 14, the southern portion of Fitchburg retained its rural character. Various horse farms are now located in this part of the City, boarding and training horses, offering tourist lodging, and hosting equestrian-related events and lessons related to the following:

**DRESSAGE:** Termed "horse ballet," horse and rider perform a routine from memory.

**DRIVING:** Races and/or dressage utilizing a wagon with a driver pulled by the horse.

**EVENTING:** Jumping and dressage.

**POLO:** A team sport played on horseback with goals scored by driving a ball into the opposing team's goal using a long-handled mallet.



THE PAST IS PRESENT



Wendt Road in Old Fitchburg, and its lumberyard and feed mill in the early 20th century. [Fitchburg Historical Society]

## SETTLEMENT FOLLOWS THE RAILROAD

The shift of transportation from stagecoach to railroad in the mid-19th century led to a shift in settlement of Fitchburg as well. Settlement moved from the stagecoach stop at Oak Hall, at the Fish Hatchery Road-County Highway M intersection, to this spot along the Illinois Central rail line. Illinois Central established the Fitchburg Depot here in 1888, spurring development of the area that became known as Old Fitchburg.

## LIFE IN OLD FITCHBURG

Old Fitchburg was a hub of commercial activity, containing a grocery store, post office, feed mill, lumber and coal yard, implement dealer, stockyard, blacksmith shop, church, and cheese factory. During Prohibition, the Purcell grocery store became known for its sale of Peruna, a cure-all tonic containing 18% alcohol. Dora Wendt took over the grocery in 1924, providing a social gathering spot for locals. The Fitchburg Depot closed in 1926 leading to a decline in settlement of the area.

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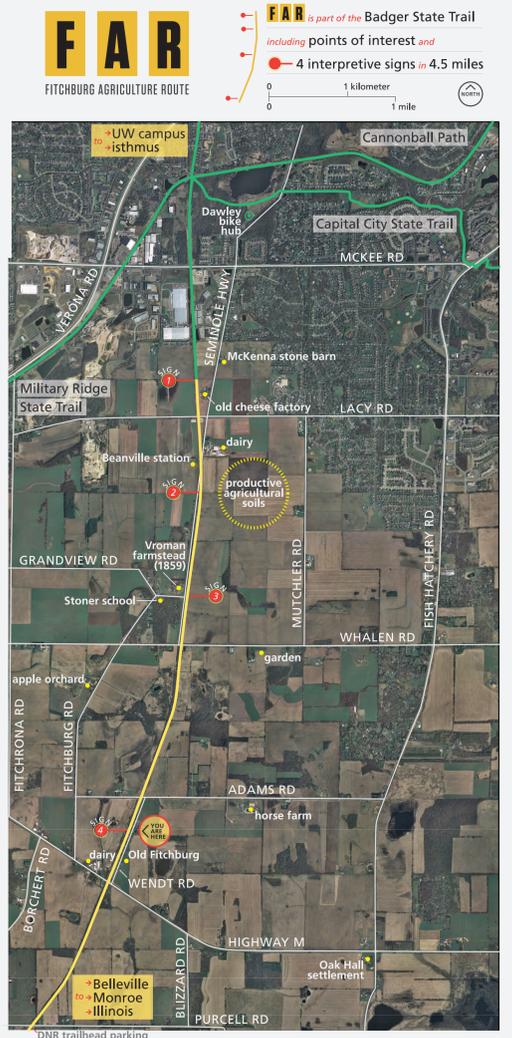
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Apple orchards and other agricultural-related businesses are located along the FAR. [Brianne Karabetsos]



▲ Horse farms are a popular land use along the FAR. [Carolyn Brady]

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